Escalation in Ukraine: conflicting interpretations hamper international diplomacy

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Conflicting Interpretations Hamper International Diplomacy

Sabine Fischer

Russia and the West apply diametrically opposed interpretations of the crisis in Ukraine and the role of international actors. This lack of a shared understanding of events hampers international efforts to resolve the crisis through negotiations. The differences are rooted in opposing narratives about the development of regional and international relations during the past two decades. When formulating Western policy it is important to take account of the Russian narrative and the logic it creates.

The Russian reading of the upheaval in Ukraine is essentially based on three beliefs. Firstly, the Russian leadership presumes that the mass protests and expulsion of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich coincide with Western interests and were not only supported but also orchestrated by the West. The objective of Western actors, they believe, is to install pro-Western regimes in the Russian neighbourhood to roll back Russian influence. The Western interest is understood not as encouraging democracy, but consolidating zones of influence. The Russian political elite sees Russia as a leading power in a multi-polar world and regards the former Soviet Union as its own sphere of influence. Outside interference here, for example in the guise of NATO expansion or European Union overtures, is regarded as a violation of Russian interests. From the mid-1990s to about the mid-2000s Moscow saw the United States and NATO as its most important rival for influence in the region. Since the advent of the Eastern Partnership in 2008/2009, however, this perspective has also increasingly included the European Union.

Secondly, Moscow regards the events of 21 and 22 February 2014 in Kiev as "an unconstitutional coup and a military seizure of power". Moscow bases its position on the agreement mediated by the German, French and Polish foreign ministers and signed by Yanukovich and the opposition on 21 February. Two points are especially emphasised: Firstly, the government of national unity provided in the agreement never came into being. Secondly, a constitutional reform process was to run from March to September 2014, before the presidential elections scheduled for the end of the year. This too, Moscow notes, is now impossible with presidential elections rescheduled for 25 May. Instead, the Russians say, the opposition broke the agreement and drove Yanukovich out of office. On the

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basis of this line of argument the Russian leadership denies the new Ukrainian government in Kiev any legitimacy and refuses to recognise it as a negotiating partner. From Moscow's perspective only the Ukrainian parliament still retains a vestige of legitimacy.

Thirdly, Moscow sees the political stage in post-Yanukovich Kiev dominated by Ukrainian nationalists and extremists who threaten the physical safety of the Russian minority in the country. This theory was initially provoked by the new government's hasty annulment of a language law passed by Yanukovich in 2012 to strengthen the status of the Russian language. Russian politicians and commentators point to attacks on ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and regularly claim increasing numbers of refugees from eastern and southern Ukraine crossing into Russia – but without supplying any credible evidence.

It is points two and three that create Russia's justification for its actions in Crimea. Under its military doctrine of 2010, Moscow reserves the right to deploy its armed forces if the security of Russian citizens outside its borders is threatened. In the days following the intervention various political actors defined the group enjoying such protection very comprehensively to include ethnic and cultural Russians, all Russian-speakers or even the entire population of Ukraine. To justify the annexation of Crimea the Kremlin leadership also cites a written request for assistance from Yanukovich, whom Russia still regards as the legitimate Ukrainian president. In this narrative the Russian actions in Crimea represent an attempt to stabilise rather than destabilise the situation in Ukraine.

Russian Motives, Objectives and Messages

In the framework of this narrative, motives, objectives and messages can be identified at various levels behind Russia's actions. The fall of Yanukovich represented an immense loss of Russian influence in Ukraine. The new political actors in Kiev – the Ukrainian Fatherland Party Batkivshchyna, Svoboda and the representatives of the Maidan revolutionaries – are forces with whom the Kremlin had poor relations or none at all prior to the revolution. To that extent the Russian move on Crimea is directed towards preserving or creating levers by which to maintain influence on political processes in Ukraine.

At the regional level Moscow is sending a strong message. Russia is claiming unrestricted hegemony in its immediate neighbourhood. Since returning to the presidency President Putin has made regional integration in the post-Soviet space his top foreign policy priority. Alongside its Customs Union, Moscow also wants to create a Eurasian Economic Union from 2015. To date only Belarus and Kazakhstan are involved. However, from the Russian point of view Ukraine has always been central to the success of its integration efforts. Now Moscow has shown that it will accept neither regime change nor a neighbouring state turning to the European Union, and that it is prepared to use military force to assert its hegemony.

That message is also addressed to the European Union, the United States and NATO. By initiating a new territorial conflict in Crimea, Russia complicates not only domestic political processes in Ukraine but also the future development of relations between Ukraine and those Western actors. Thus the Kremlin can now hope to have dashed on any hopes the new government in Kiev might have had of joining NATO.

The Russian leadership has demonstrated toughness and spoken a language that its Western counterparts are both unwilling and unable to reciprocate. It has presented itself as the government of a major power that, like other major powers, can ride roughshod over the sovereignty and territorial integrity of another state. In fact, the intense international efforts to negotiate a solution can be seen – from

Moscow – as enhancing Russia's international status at least temporarily.

The show of strength also has a domestic political function. The Russian leadership has responded to the mass protests against the rigged Duma election of 2011 and the return of Vladimir Putin to the office of president in 2012 with a conservative societal model enforced through repression. Here foreign policy plays an important role. It is, the message goes, obvious that Russia as a major power has to protect itself and its immediate sphere of influence from negative social and political influences from the West. Here the discursive circle closes: Western attempts to install "anti-Russian regimes" in the Russian neighbourhood must be resisted with utmost determination and foreign policy becomes a source of legitimacy for the political leadership in the conservative sections of Russian society. This simultaneously warns progressive actors in society that harsh measures will be taken against any attempt to change the government. Here we see the same, albeit stronger, link between domestic and foreign policy that led to a strengthening of authoritarian tendencies inside Russia after the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine a decade ago.

The overarching motivation of the Russian leadership is to secure its own power and control internally and externally. Its resort to military force demonstrates how deeply it feels its power threatened by the events of the past weeks.

On Dealing with Opposing Narratives

Russia was, like the European Union, taken unawares by the events in Kiev. The forcefulness and rapidity of the Russian response can be attributed to shock over its own miscalculation. This explains both its refusal to recognise the new rulers in Kiev and its intervention in Crimea. Moscow's actions are thus simultaneously reactive and aggressive, but within the context of the Russian narrative largely rational and logical.

An expansion of the military intervention to the eastern Ukraine would be very risky for Moscow and therefore appears unlikely. The ethno-political situation in Crimea is clearer than in the eastern provinces, as are the economic and political interests. Ultimately, Crimea is a distinct and thus militarily controllable territory, while any intervention in eastern Ukraine would significantly increase the risk of confrontation with Ukrainian forces or even a proliferation of the conflict beyond the Ukrainian borders.

But its narrative has put the Russian leadership in a discursive cage that it will find it difficult to escape. Moscow would have to retreat from its harsh stance both internally and externally. It would also have to revise or revoke the justifications for its actions to date. The loss of face for the Kremlin would be enormous, especially given that the narrative described above has been deeply entrenched into social consciousness by years of media coverage. This is also underscored by recent opinion polls that show large parts of the Russian population supporting the actions of their leadership. In view of the internal legitimacy function of foreign policy, any retreat from the established position and interpretation could be costly and risky for the Kremlin. Moscow will therefore maintain its course of isolation and confrontation.

For their part, the European Union and other Western actors cannot accept Russia's military intervention, nor the violation of international law and the Ukrainian constitution represented by the secession of Crimea and its integration into the Russian Federation. The European Council on 6 March 2014 agreed a three-stage sanction mechanism to be applied if the Russians refuse to enter negotiations and instead further exacerbate the crisis.

In the short term sanctions are likely to have the opposite effect than intended. Moscow will retaliate both against targeted restrictions imposed upon individual members of the Russian political and business elite and against broader economic sanc-

tions. The stance of the Russian leadership towards its own opposition and civil society will harden further. The same applies to Russian policies in the region and at the international level. The political leadership is unlikely to back down until the economic consequences of sanctions are felt by representatives of the political and economic elite (and possibly the broader population). Initially the opposite effect must be assumed, so the danger of spiralling escalation remains large.

That is not an argument against sanctions, but a call for a realistic stance on their unintended negative consequences. A policy of sanctions must be accompanied by measures to cushion such unwanted side-effects. Offers of talks must be kept open. The European Union should also think creatively about how Moscow could be persuaded to make minor concessions without losing face. Ultimately, realistic criteria must be defined to ensure that sanctions can be lifted again. The European Union must continue to strive to promote exchange with Russian society. In this context it is questionable whether the suspension of the visa negotiations should be prolonged.

In its eastern neighbourhood the European Union should pursue a two-track course. Firstly it should keep a watchful eye on how and where the consequences of the present crisis become noticeable. This will be the case in Ukraine and very probably in Moldova, possibly also in Georgia. The European Union should stand by these states politically and economically as they cope with the repercussions.

At the same time EU policy in Ukraine and towards other states in the region must not simply become the opposite of its Russia policy. It must sensitively take account of the internal political circumstances; specifically, a cooperative but also critical stance towards the new political leadership in Kiev is of decisive importance. But it must also realistically assess the consequences of its policies for the region as a whole. In recent years the European Union has made a great mistake in stumbling blindly into a geopolitical zero-sum game with Russia over the post-Soviet space. A more self-critical attitude by both sides towards their own narratives could be an important step towards détente – if Russia were willing to play along. Regrettably that is not to be expected any time soon.

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